

“Micromuseums for big questions: Collecting maritime remains as an everyday political practice”

Eliseu Carbonell
Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural

Introduction

Ethnological Museums present different typologies: from the Open-Air Museum to the Ecomuseum, Economuseum, Regional Museum, Civilisation Museum or Society Museum (Roigé 2007). In this paper, I want to introduce another typology of ethnological museum which I call Micromuseum, not only because of its dimension, but also because its promoters conserve, do research, and exhibit the maritime heritage at a small scale.

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in a small town on the north-eastern Catalan coast of Spain, where local fishing was one of the main activities until the 1980s. Recently, the remains of traditional fishing -objects left on the sand- have become cultural heritage. Some town's people founded an association devoted to collecting, restoring, and exhibiting old fishing boats and other objects, in order to preserve the town's maritime identity.

As a result of this collection, a 30 square metre museum was opened in August 2007 inside an old beach hut containing a boat pulling machine and other old fishing tackle. This small museum is what we could call a micromuseum. However, this curatorial vision clashed with other beach uses, such as recreational fishing and other leisure activities. At the same time, the Ministry of Public Works announced the construction of a seafront promenade on the same site. This announcement caused great controversy in this apparently peaceful town. Landscape, the maritime identity, and public uses of the beach were hot topics that summer.

In this paper, first of all, I am going to introduce this micromuseum and its social context. Secondly, I will try to summarize the conflicts generated around the micromuseum, especially around the project to construct a seafront promenade just in the place where the micromuseum is located. And, finally I will draw some conclusions about how the micromuseum manages to impose a certain notion of authenticity linked to the fishing past on other beach uses.

The discussion shows how the micromuseum -and the collecting activity it implies- is used by the association who promoted it, to give strength and legitimacy to their own ideas about what the beach should be like, to whom its use should belong, and finally about the village's maritime or fishing identity. We explore how collecting and caring for maritime remains became an everyday political practice that people used to negotiate identity and authenticity, even if that was just with a micromuseum.

1. A micromuseum in a coastal village

A micromuseum is small space transformed into a museum. That is not new at all, but it will probably be of increasing importance, as it makes it possible for local people to build a museological narrative about itself through collecting objects in an affordable space. Micromusems can therefore become very powerful tools making it possible for certain social groups, competing along with other such groups, to impose a determined vision of society that is not shared by all members of society.

The micromuseum is situated in a small town of 5,000 inhabitants on the central coast of Catalonia. The village's maritime past was extinguished in the mid-eighties, when the last fishing boats moved to a neighbouring fishing port. This village has quite a dynamic cultural network. Among others, there is an association devoted to traditional sailing that I will call "Full Sail", formed by approximately 40 persons. As explained on

its website, this association is intended to “promote the conservation and dissemination of maritime heritage”. Until now, they have restored several lateen sail fishing boats (a triangular sail used specially in the Mediterranean) and other fishing tackle. But their most ambitious project has been the restoration of a small building that contains a boat pulling machine, transforming it into a museum, more exactly a micro-museum, despite its pompous official name: “Traditional Stranding Interpretation Centre”.

This micromuseum is known in the town as “the engine house”. It is a rectangular building of 30 square metres covered with a two-pronged roof. The walls overlooking the beach are equipped with large windows to ensure maximum visibility. The house was built in 1931 to accommodate the engine used to pull fishing boats ashore from the sea, and thus to replace the team of oxen that were traditionally used in this coast to do this work. Inside the house there are located two engines and a winch. The main engine is electrical, and there is a second one, diesel, used in case of breakdowns. The two engines have never stopped working since 1931, although in recent years they were used only to pull recreational fishing boats. This detail must be kept in mind, as we shall to go back to it later.

The restoration and musealisation of the house was conducted some months before August 2007, when it was officially inaugurated in a ceremony attended by local and provincial authorities, as well as residents and tourists. “Full Sail” volunteers worked hard restoring the small building. The access was modified and the windows and roof replaced by new ones. Inside the house everything was cleaned, the engines were painted and tuned. They threw out some old junk and an adequate lighting system was installed. Old pictures and some traditional fishing posters were placed on the walls, and some decorative fishing objects were hung from the roof. On the day of the inauguration I could hear an old woman complaining that they had thrown away the

table where fishermen spent time playing cards while waiting for better weather. This detail shows the contradiction between the fishing culture as lived experience and the fishing culture as heritage.

The area around the micromuseum was also cleaned. Old ropes, cables and chains were replaced by new ropes rolled ready to be used. They knocked down outside non-decorative elements and moved away the objects that could distort the vision of the building in its original style. Also modern plastic boats disappeared from the surround and only traditional wooden boats were left. Among the plastic boats that were displaced, there was a boat where a poor, homeless, old fisherman lives. This boat had been situated close to the engine house providing protection from the weather, but it was moved far away, close to the beach toilets. In its place, half a dozen new beams like those once used to move the fishing boats were piled-up on the sand.

All this shows that the restoration of the house and its transformation into a micromuseum is part of a comprehensive project that does not stop at the engine house, but includes the beach and seafront, giving the coastal landscape the category of heritage. Thus, in this way, the beach is understood as an Open-Air Museum. The main objective of this association, as it claims on its website, local publications, as well as in my interviews with them, is to restore the appearance of a genuine fisherman's beach that was lost in the last twenty years, recovering the maritime heritage of the village, by collecting and restoring fishing remains, as much as they can. This process is not going on without tension. This curatorial project is considered by some people as a private appropriation of a common area that has many other uses, different if not contradictory to the curatorial project.

2. The dispute for the beach

In order to understand the conflict generated around the attempt to transform the fishing remains into cultural heritage we must understand that the beach is primarily a landscape. As claimed by Bender (2003: 324): “Landscape is never passive. People engage with it, rework it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation-state”. This describes exactly what happened in the attempt to transform the beach into a sort of Ethnological Museum.

Three statements about the beach appear in almost every interview with local people: the first is that the beach is always new and clean in this village; the second is that the beach is a public place; and the third is that the beach is a sign of the town’s identity.

The first assertion is explained by the frequent storms that affect this area. The northeasterly storms empty the beach of sand, returning it after a few days when the wind changes to southwesterly. This happens especially in winter, and caused obvious problems to fishermen in the past, but people are proud of their beach sand being cleaned by the storms. Of course they do not mention that waves tend to leave all kinds of rubbish that the Mediterranean, the dirtiest sea in the world, returns to the beaches. Anyway, this assertion reflects a sense of pride that people feel for their own beach.

The second assertion -the beach is a public space- is based on the fact that the beach is the centre of the village’s social life in summer: leisure, sunbathing, summer festivals, water sports, etc. Just at the right side of the micromuseum there is a beach bar that was opened in the nineteen sixties by the engine operators to take advantage of emerging tourism. But, despite being a very popular bar and historically linked to fishing -as it permitted a complement to the engine operators’ income-, the

micromuseum promoters don't want the bar close to their museum. They also resent the presence of other objects alien to traditional fishing. The beach has the "Blue Flag Beach" distinctive given by the European Foundation For Environmental Education to beaches with a range of environmental conditions and facilities. This implies the presence of showers, toilets, Red Cross first aid, access for disabled people up to the seashore and other elements that have nothing to do with traditional fishing.

In July 2007, one month before the inauguration of the micromuseum, I used to visit it in the evenings, just to see how the work was getting on, and to talk informally with people from the "Full Sail" association. They spent all their spare time working there in order to ensure that everything was ready for the inauguration. One evening I said that everything was going to be very nice, just to encourage them. One of them turned towards me and said: "Yes, especially when the bar, the Red Cross post, the toilets and the showers are removed" and continued with his work. This comment reflects a sense of ownership over the beach shared by the promoters of the micromuseum, seeking a state of purity or authenticity through the recovery of maritime heritage. But the sense of ownership of the beach is not an exclusive of this group. On the contrary, it is a general sense among villagers, who feel the beach as part of their identity.

The third assertion is related to identity. Many people defined the beach as a part of their life and identity during my interviews. Besides, in a document elaborated by the Village Council about the Village Planning Act, the beach and seafront is defined as integrated into the village landscape and identity. This was very evident in the summer of 2007, just when the micromuseum was opened.

At the beginning of summer 2007, something unexpected happened to break the tranquillity of this quiet place. One morning, a large banner from Coastal Affairs

General Direction (Environment Ministry) appeared near the beach, very close to the micromuseum. It announced the renovation of the seafront with a budget of nearly two million euros. Protest graffiti appeared very soon on the banner. The battle against the renovation of the seafront was fought both on the streets and in Internet forums, where behind anonymity, insults and threats grew. A civil platform in defence of the beach was organized. This platform believed that the construction of a seafront promenade was in the interest of the train line that passes near the beach. They claimed that it would mean the disappearance of the beach under the stones of the seafront promenade. Different ideologies were mixed in this platform, from conservationism to Catalan nationalism, united in defending the beach as a sign of local identity. They organized street demonstrations, they collected signatures against it, they organised assemblies, distributed leaflets, and they also protested during Council plenary sessions, where some people verbally and physically abused the Mayor.

During a demonstration against the promenade, a can full of sand from the beach was situated in front of the door of the Town Council. It had a plaque which read: “The Beach 1574-2007”. 1574 is the founding date of the town. It means that the beach was born with the village and if the beach disappears, the town would disappear too. This example illustrates the strong identification between beach and town.

According to the civil platform, the threat against the beach was primarily due to the Town Council, especially the Mayor and the Town Planning Councillor, both born outside the town, which was insistently remarked. In the second instance, they accused the Spanish Government Environment Ministry, and especially the Spanish railway company (Renfe). In the context of Catalan nationalism, the idea of a railway network connecting the village with the rest of Spain, managed from Madrid, operates as a symbolic representation of the Spanish oppression that threatens “our sand”, the beach where the identity of the people lies. There were very illustrative photomontages

circulating on the net, calling for demonstrations against the seafront promenade. They show the Village Planning Councillor dressed with a folkloric Sevillian dress, in order to underline his supposed relation with the Spanish interests in the village. In another one we can see the dictator Franco sending trains, as if they were battle tanks, under the village Romanesque chapel, to invade the beach. All these examples serve to show the strong play of identities that can be found behind the beach.

3. The legitimacy of the collectors

One of the initiatives protesting against the seafront promenade fortunately failed: they proposed boycotting the opening ceremony of the micromuseum, taking advantage of the presence of authorities to protest against the promenade. In a message to the Internet forum created by the platform, the person who proposed this wrote: “we will see what the Full Sail opportunists do when left without their beach”.

The group of people who, with much effort, work to recover the village’s maritime heritage, have been target of much criticism. On one hand, there are those who see them as “opportunists” who, under the pretext of protecting local heritage, occupy the beach in order to practice their own hobby. After all, the restored wooden sailing boats are used only by the members of this group to navigate with their friends and families.

This criticism also comes from the plastic boat owners that have been displaced to a corner of the beach. They are mainly retired people who have small fishing boats for entertainment. They also have their own association and for years they used the pulling machine. During the past thirty years they paid the rent and electricity bills of the house and kept the engines running, with more or less care. But when the association Full Sail presented the project to transform the engine house into a museum, the Council suggested that they cede the house and move their boats away.

On the other hand, there is the critical and ironic point of view of elderly people in the village that once were involved in the local fishing industry. The day of the micromuseum inauguration I was able to gather their opinions. An enthusiast of modelling traditional boats told me that there was not one single boat correctly built. An old fisherman said that none of those who were there with the traditional boats had ever fished in his life. Another old woman joked about their difficulty and slowness at pushing boats into the sea. These and other comments reflected the gap between the heritage project and the lived experience of the people of the sea.

Finally, there is no need to say that a beach is a place where a large number of social interactions take place. All these forms of sociability are alien to the heritage project.

But the volunteers of “Full Sail” feel that they themselves are the legitimate heirs of the ancient fishermen and therefore entitled to spread on the beach what they understand is the maritime culture of the place, across rough recreations of fishing boats, not from the twentieth century, but from the nineteenth century; and not the engine house as a workplace but as a collecting place, namely a micromuseum. With their heritage project the promoters of the micromuseum are seeking a sort of authenticity that is not shared by older fishermen, neither by other beach users. Anyway, they have the blessing of the authorities and their project will probably be imposed on other beach uses. The collecting and curatorial activity connected to the heritage project legitimates them to do it.

REFERENCES

- Bender, B. (2003) "Landscape", in Barnard, A. & Spencer, J. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, London, Routledge
- Roigé, X. (2007) "Museos etnológicos: entre la crisis y la redefinición", *Quaderns-E*, 09-2007^a

Abstract

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in 2007 in a small town on the central coast of Catalonia, Spain. It presents a maritime heritage project as a local strategy to impose a certain idea of authenticity. In this sense, collecting and restoring maritime remains can be seen as an everyday political practice. The curatorial vision of the beach clashes with other visions and uses. But a micromuseum will be used to give legitimacy to a maritime heritage project for the village, in the face of other interests.

Resumen

Este artículo está basado en un trabajo de campo llevado a cabo durante el año 2007 en un pueblo de la costa central de Catalunya, España. Observamos un proyecto sobre patrimonio marítimo como una estrategia para imponer cierta idea de autenticidad. De este modo, el acto de coleccionar y restaurar restos de objetos ligados a la cultura marítima puede leerse como una forma cotidiana de práctica política. La visión museística de la playa choca con otras visiones y usos. Pero un micromuseo será usado para legitimar el proyecto de patrimonio marítimo frente a otros intereses.

* A previous draft of this paper was presented at 10th EASA Conference in Ljubljana on 29th August, 2008. I am grateful to Benoît de l'Estoile for his comments. This research was supported by a grant from the Catalan Ethnological Heritage Inventory Programme, Generalitat de Catalunya (CPCPTC/IPEC), Ref. G651-N06/002.